

SAC

Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (Public Organization) Newsletter March 2013



Culture and Rights in Thailand



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SAC Newsletter Introduction Culture and Rights in Thailand

Over the past two decades, the right to culture and the right to “belong to” a culture has become an increasingly important topic in contemporary academic debate. Whereas historically, human rights discourses have focused on the rights of the individual, in recent years, “culture”—particularly the right to ‘belong to’ a culture—has become a focus of rights claims. As enshrined in a number of international legal instruments, most recently the 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, “cultural rights are an integral part of human rights, which are universal, indivisible and interdependent.”

International cultural rights instruments aim to encourage states to recognize the value of diversity and recognize the “group rights” of minority and indigenous groups. In many parts of the world, these groups at the sub-national level are asserting their rights, utilizing a distinctive language, tradition, locality, race, ethnicity or religion as a basis for claims to land, environmental protection, political autonomy, employment and the repatriation of traditional cultural resources.

Since 2009, the SAC’s Culture and Rights in Thailand (CRT) project has sought to uncover how these complex issues are being explored and negotiated within the context of Thailand. A multi-year, and multi-sited research project, CRT endeavored to answer the following questions:

- How is the concept of cultural rights defined and understood in Thailand?
- Who “owns” and/or controls cultural heritage, and through what mechanisms?
- Which groups are using the discourse of cultural right to stake claims and why?

This issue of the SAC Newsletter features several of the projects undertaken as part of the Culture and Rights in Thailand project, offering a glimpse of what’s to come in the forthcoming volume, *Rights to Culture: Heritage, Language and Community in Thailand*, edited by Dr. Coeli Barry and published by Silkworm Books (2013) .

As always, we welcome your comments and feedback!

Alexandra Denes
Editor



The Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre is pleased to welcome a new director, Dr. Somsuda Leyavanija, who joined the SAC in 2 January 2013. Originally from Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya province, Dr. Somsuda had the opportunity to see many parts of Thailand as a child, as her father was engineer for a sugar refinery with operations in different locations. Her mother was an English teacher who always encouraged Dr. Somsuda to learn English through books and magazines, which equipped her with an interest and gift for language-learning ever since. She also credits her experience in boarding school for teaching her to be “strong, orderly, tolerate, independent and capable of solving problems at hand.”

After completing high school level from Rajini School, Dr. Somsuda joined an AFS (American Field Service) program and spent a year as an exchange student in U.S.A. She then continued her undergraduate study at the Faculty of Archaeology, Silpakorn University. Later, she was granted the Ananda Mahidol Foundation scholarship and pursued her Master’s degree in Anthropology at the University of Otago in New Zealand, graduating in 1979. In 1988, Dr. Somsuda completed a Ph.D. degree in Prehistory from the Australian National University with the Ananda Mahidol Foundation scholarship as well.

Her first duty after the completion of her Ph.D. degree was to serve as an archaeologist at the Division of Archaeology, Fine Arts Department. At that time, she was responsible for the preparation of World Heritage nomination files for three cultural heritage sites: namely, Ban Chiang, Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, and her work was successfully accomplished, as they were listed by UNESCO as “World Heritage” sites. She was later assigned to a bureaucratic position at the Division of Archaeology, where she traveled with the director and head archaeologist to work in many different regions. Her work during this period included research at the Ban Chiang heritage site and a historical areas study project in Nakhon Nayok province. Moreover, in addition to being consistently active in Thailand’s archaeological sector, Dr. Somsuda has had many opportunities to experience different types of work, since she has taken up various positions such as Secretary of the Director General of the Fine Arts Department, Director of the Chiang Mai National Museum, Director of the Office of Archaeology, Director of the National Archives of Thailand and Deputy Director General of the Fine Arts Department. Her last position before joining the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre was Director General of the Fine Arts Department, where she fully dedicated her archaeological experiences in looking after Thailand’s heritage. Especially in the time of natural disaster, Dr. Somsuda always paid close attention to the situation, monitoring the recovery of archaeological sites in the disaster areas. Moreover, Dr. Somsuda was appointed by the Government as a representative of Thailand on the World Heritage Committee and took part in the 17th General Assembly of State Parties to the World Heritage Convention and the 35th UNESCO General Conference.

Apart from the administrative tasks, Dr. Somsuda also produced a wide range of academic literatures that are significant for Thailand’s archaeological research and study. She played a vital role in compiling and translating the Fine Arts Department’s books and documents, namely “Theories and Practices for the Preservation of Monuments and Archaeological Sites” (หนังสือทฤษฎีและแนวปฏิบัติการอนุรักษ์อนุสรณ์สถานและแหล่งโบราณคดี), “The Fine Arts Department Standards and Practices in the Management of Archaeological Sites, Archaeology and Museums” (หนังสือร่างมาตรฐานและแนวปฏิบัติของกรมศิลปากรในการจัดการโบราณสถาน โบราณคดีและการพิพิธภัณฑน์), “Management Guidelines for World Heritage Sites” (หนังสือแนวทางการจัดการโบราณสถานในบัญชีมรดกทางวัฒนธรรมของโลก) and “Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies of UNESCO” (หนังสือการประกาศนโยบายด้านวัฒนธรรมของนครเม็กซิโกขององค์การยูเนสโก).

Engaging Cultural Rights in Research, Practice and Policy: Lessons from the Culture and Rights in Thailand Project

■ by Coeli Barry

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Cultural institutions around the world today are facing challenges in terms of how they preserve and disseminate knowledge about cultural heritage. Over the past 20 years, changes in information technology and a greater appreciation of the power of representation are prompting public institutions to re-assess policies and guidelines about who should have access to existing holdings and how new information should be gathered and made available to the public. Institutions increasingly find themselves facing decisions about the ethics of making digitized material more widely available to source communities, as well as about how anthropological materials should be collected and displayed.

In some cases, cultural institutions, such as museums, libraries, archives and research centers, have developed restricted access protocols and digital repatriation policies in response to the demands of communities to either return items or facilitate greater community access. Even if cultural institutions are not directly challenged by community claims, they may still take part in the widespread and lively debate in professional gatherings, scholarly outlets and on the internet about the most suitable institutional policies that can take account of the interests of the ‘culture bearers’ alongside those of the public more widely. In fields as diverse as museum studies, archaeology, knowledge management, heritage studies, visual arts, and anthropology, there is an increasing awareness of the potential for innovation in how anthropological knowledge is gathered, used and displayed.

One framework that is emerging as particularly salient for practitioners and scholars alike is a rights-based approach to heritage management. This approach draws on international human rights conventions that promote the notion of ‘a right to culture’ in a general sense,

as well as those documents that address cultural rights for minorities, or the rights of communities to participate in managing their heritage in more particular cases. The right to culture and the right to “belong to” a culture has become an increasingly important topic in contemporary academic debates, and this concept has found expression in international human rights instruments, including the 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. National governments may not uniformly or enthusiastically endorse these international rights documents, even when they sign them. Nonetheless, practitioners, scholars, rights advocates and community leaders reference them and draw on rights norms in their own work.

In 2009, researchers at the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (SAC) proposed to undertake a project on Culture and Rights in Thailand (CRT) with the goal of understanding how these issues were being negotiated in the context of Thailand. The concept of cultural rights and the right to culture is relatively new in Thailand, and the CRT sought to identify if there were local, vernacular equivalents to the Western, international discourse of cultural rights. Thailand’s

democratization movements in the 1990s gave rise to constitutionally-sanctioned rights for communities to have a greater role in managing cultural and natural resources, but with all the subsequent shifts in the domestic political landscape in the 2000s, little was known about how (or if) the rights formalized in the 1997 Constitution were being actualized. Recognizing that research on this topic was necessary for SAC in its capacity as a knowledge repository and as the preeminent research institution in the country on anthropology, the CRT project director, Dr. Alexandra Denes, along with other researchers, saw the need for new research about rights and culture.

The Culture and Rights in Thailand project was designed to allow researchers within and beyond SAC to take part in seminar-style discussions of key texts in the areas of cultural rights, cultural heritage management and rights, and the anthropology of rights. My own role as advisor to the project began in late 2009 when we started these discussions together. Through these seminars, we deepened our understanding of scholarly debates about culture and rights, and did so in a collaborative way. This collaborative aspect to CRT has been a constant throughout, and it has made for one of the richest intellectual journeys in which I have ever taken part. We were very fortunate as a project to have the participation of junior- and mid-career researchers, as well as resource people who brought invaluable expertise to the project.

Another core objective of CRT was to support original ethnographic research. A total of nine sub-projects were supported through small grants, and research was undertaken starting in the latter part of 2010. These projects came to fruition as papers in 2011, and a number of these papers were selected for inclusion in the edited volume *Rights to Culture : Heritage, Language and Community in Thailand*. (This book is being published by Silkworm Books, www.silkwormbooks.com) The topical, geographic and disciplinary variety across

these sub-projects is a striking feature of this project as a whole. Commonalities across projects were not necessarily anticipated, but, with the help of exceptionally able and generous resource people in conversation with the CRT researchers, we paid attention to these commonalities, and in so doing enriched both individual projects and the larger project as a whole.

The expansive title for the project was intentional, encouraging critical reflection on the relationship between rights and culture as well as exploring tensions between these concepts. This deliberately wide swath allowed

us to bring together topics which might not otherwise be in dialogue with one another, and encouraged us to speak to the cross-cutting issues, revealing the conditions in which people engaged in rights claiming, as well

as those where rights-approaches were not in evidence. When the research revealed a sense of injustice, either among 'traditional minorities' or new minorities, did this awareness of injustice get expressed in rights idioms or in other terms? What happens when people are asked and given a chance to 'talk back' to the state on policies affecting the survival and maintenance of their heritage? These were some of the issues taken up.

“The right to culture and the right to “belong to” a culture has become an increasingly important topic in contemporary academic debates, and this concept has found expression in international human rights instruments, including the 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity”





In the conceptual framing of the project, we also sought to explore rights as culture and the culture of rights in Thailand. While Thailand participates actively in the international rights regime and has a rich discursive and political history of contesting civil and political rights, thinking through, let alone claiming, cultural rights is a challenge given how effectively state-initiated, top-down policies on ‘culture’ have been enacted. Thailand is rich in ethnic diversity, culture and tradition but this diversity has been harnessed to a fictive but nonetheless powerful unitary cultural ideal called ‘Thainess’. Difference in Thailand, then, can be encompassed into narratives of belonging which foreclose the possibilities of overt contestation or rights-claiming.

We were aware from the start how the ‘problem of culture’ has inserted itself into public discussions of human rights, particularly in the 1990s when human rights frameworks were sometimes rejected by governments in the name of resisting the West and “preserving culture’. Though Thailand’s social movement leaders and intellectuals were open to human rights (albeit with lively discussion about contextualizing global rights norms to make for more fruitful integration with existing Thai norms about justice and obligations of the state), the CRT project members were attuned to how these discourses and practices have been translated and localized.

To examine rights as culture means understanding rights as a discourse, and a fluid and contested body of practice. Anthropology has also embraced an understanding of culture as practices that are open to change and contestable. But with the expansion of rights discourse at the international level, scholars note that there is an increase of “culturalist” claims made by groups invoking ideas of distinctive language, tradition, locality, race, ethnicity or religion as the basis of their claims to land, political autonomy or the repatriation of traditional cultural resources. In some instances, cultural rights are invoked to justify opposition to projects which pose a threat to a culturally distinctive way of life, in other instances cultural rights are invoked to claim exemption from the laws binding other citizens. The CRT researchers were keenly aware of these dimensions to cultural rights claims and sought to document the ways that group claims in Thai contexts, while by no means exempt from the potential risks of essentializing, are often strategically adopted when negotiating with the state.

“The Culture and Rights project was designed as a critical academic research project, the findings from which could further the SAC’s mandate of contributing to policy-making and to giving voice to community perspectives on cultural heritage.”

The Culture and Rights project was designed as a critical academic research project, the findings from which could further the SAC’s mandate of contributing to

policy-making and to giving voice to community perspectives on cultural heritage. The multi-faceted aspect of the project pushed the CRT researchers to find ways to communicate their findings to different types of audiences. To achieve this objective, the CRT supported stakeholder engagement projects that enabled researchers to return to their field-sites and share insights from their findings to relevant audiences. These stakeholder engagement projects (or action-research projects) took the shape of seminars with community leaders, government officials and representatives from civil society in different settings. In some cases, these projects produced short films where the views of the community and government representatives can be heard.

The Culture and Rights in Thailand project would not have been possible without the administrative and program management support from the Centre—the support which makes collaborative critical inquiry possible. It is difficult in Thailand to find settings where empirical social science research and scholarly exchange is nurtured and supported, and where the research findings can be disseminated widely—and in the case of the CRT in both Thai and English. Though the project was brought to conclusion in September, 2012, our work continues within SAC where we are conducting a series called the Cultural Rights Forum. <http://www.sac.or.th/databases/cultureandrights/resources-2/cultural-rights-forum/>



Throughout the year, we read and discuss important articles from cultural rights debate and familiarize ourselves with innovations in programming at other cultural institutions that seek to reassess how the interests of source communities can best be reflected as these institutions forge their policies on documenting, archiving and disseminating knowledge about cultural heritage. Cultural rights can get activated in the space where the institutions meet the communities whose heritage they are representing. Institutions such as the SAC can play an important role in mediating interests of government agencies, community leaders, researchers and other practitioners. It is our hope that the knowledge gained through the CRT project can be of help as SAC defines its role in the on-going debates about cultural rights.



This article is dedicated to the memory of Arithat Srisuwannakij (Tieng). Until his untimely death in December, 2012 Tieng was a vital presence in the CRT and in the Cultural Rights Forum.

Documenting Kantreum and Language Rights in Surin Province

by Majid Bagheri

Mr. Majid Bagheri is an Iranian filmmaker and video artist who is interested in performance art, installation art, documentary, and narrative cinema. In 2011, he finished his Master's degree at the School of Interactive Arts and Technology at Simon Fraser University and subsequently spent six months in Thailand supporting film production at the SAC (December 2011–May 2012).

In December 2011, I arrived in Bangkok to begin my work with the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre. In addition to providing technical support to the audiovisual team at SAC,

one of my main tasks was to assist with the production of a film documenting the local perspectives and preservation efforts of Northern Khmer musical forms, particularly a musical genre called *kantreum*.

The film project was part of the Culture and Rights in Thailand project at SAC, and was managed by Dr. Peter Vail, an anthropologist from the National University of Singapore, and Mr. Chaimongkol Chalermasukjitsri, a local researcher and coordinator. Since 2009, Dr. Vail and Mr. Chaimongkol had undertaken collaborative research in Surin province to understand the vital links between ethnic Khmer language and the transmission and preservation of the musical genre of *kantreum*. I was there to support them in the production of a film about the loss of the Khmer language and its impact on traditional musical expressions.

Even though I had read numerous articles and theses about the ethnic Khmer in Thailand's northeastern provinces, when I arrived in Surin, I realized that I knew next to nothing about the ethnic Khmer and their culture. For example, I had expected to find more overt

“Without the revitalization of Khmer language skills among the younger generations of ethnic Khmer, there was little chance that this genre would exist in the near future.”

and visible expressions of Khmer ethnic identity, but instead I encountered a general indifference and some opposition towards any such identifications. From talking with Dr. Vail and Mr. Chaimongkol, I

came to understand that this widespread reluctance to identify openly as ethnically “Khmer” was partly due to the general regard of the central Thai language as the route to prosperity, and partly a result of the stigma associated with Khmerness given the history of Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. I had also underestimated the impact of the global cultural industry on rural areas, and was surprised at how the cultural preferences of the youth were shaped by these global influences, marginalizing the traditional cultural expressions to the point of extinction.



Mr. Chaimongkol teaching English and Khmer at a local monastery

An ethnic Khmer native of Surin province and language rights activist, Mr. Chaimongkol has travelled extensively around Thailand, and even across the border to Cambodia in his efforts to safeguard the local Khmer heritage and language. In addition to bringing together the old masters to play traditional music, Chaimongkol was also involved in the digitization of Khmer Buddhist scriptures and the organization of Khmer language lessons at local monasteries for both adults and children. He had turned his home on the outskirts of Surin into a centre for the preservation and propagation of the local Khmer culture. He had devoted his own time and resources to these activities and it was impossible to be in his proximity without feeling the same commitment, concern and affection for the local heritage. Dr. Vail had also done a great deal of research in the area and knew many of the local musicians and culture bearers. He spoke fluent Thai and some Khmer, which proved extremely helpful during the production and editing of the film. His insights, natural curiosity and great rapport with the local people complemented Chaimongkol's devotion and connectedness to the local community. Together we devised a tentative spine for the documentary that determined how it would unfold.



Local masters playing together at Ta Lon's house

The film, entitled "Grabbing the Blue Tiger: The Past and Future of Northern Musical Khmer Arts," explores the challenges in safeguarding the local Khmer language and heritage using *kantreum* as a point of entry. Through interviews with several generations of *kantreum* performers and local heritage advocates and experts, the film documents the myriad social, economic and cultural forces which have led to the gradual decline

of the traditional form of *kantreum*, known as *kantreum dangdeum*. Once performed primarily for healing and spirit mediumship rites called *col maemot*, *kantreum dangdeum* was now increasingly being performed only for cultural heritage events, while the more popular, electronic genre, called *kantreum prayuk*, could be found widely on local stages and in CD stores in Surin, and as far afield as Cambodia.

Another core message of the film had to do with the centrality of Khmer language to the transmission of *kantreum dangdeum*. Without the revitalization of Khmer language skills among the younger generations of ethnic Khmer, there was little chance that this genre would exist in the near future.



Ta Lon singing kantreum at a Maemot (spirit mediumship) ceremony

Reflecting on the collaborative filmmaking process, for me, the language was the greatest barrier, and both Peter and Chaimongkol tried their hardest to fill me in whenever possible. During interviews, sometimes I generally understood what was being said, but other times I was totally in the dark. We would film part of an interview, pause to have a brief discussion, and then determine how to proceed, deciding how to adapt our original plan. By the time the film was finally edited, I knew most of the interviews almost word-by-word. Another challenge of the filmmaking process was that our plans were frequently disrupted by the spontaneous changes that were made in the filming schedule. Even so, I felt very respected and included in all aspects of the project and I am greatly thankful for that.

One of the oft-cited risks of filmmaking in an unfamiliar culture is the tendency to exotify the "Other." This risk becomes greater with visual media, which can be very powerful and convincing. The filmmaker's

gaze is constantly upon the characters, determining what is to be recorded and how it should be focalized. As such, there is the tendency for a filmmaker to present one worldview or narrative over all the possible others, and it is only through a critical awareness of such

power relations that one can present a more sensitive, nonjudgmental account of the context. Throughout the production, we tried to maintain an acute awareness of this issue in order to transcend the surfaces and reach the underlying human connection. Because of the collaborative engagement with local culture bearers such as Chaimongkol, I believe we were quite successful at avoiding any exotic or orientalist representations of the ethnic Northern Khmer.



Mr.Chaimongkol children playing at Ta Lon's house

When it came to appearing on camera, the people of Surin were surprisingly relaxed and well-spoken, as long as we avoided certain sensitive issues that were viewed as potentially detrimental to their social or vocational positions. Some of the interviewees spoke their minds when the camera was not around, but refused to do so on record. On issues regarding state policies towards mother tongue language acquisition in school, most preferred to voice their official positions rather than their personal opinion. This was a significant challenge for our project. A documentary film succeeds when it represents the reality of a given situation in all its complexity, which

“Indeed, one of the core challenges of this kind of collaborative documentary production is to balance the ethics of respecting the privacy and personal boundaries of the individual characters with the aims of reaching a wider audience with a compelling film.”

documentary production is to balance the ethics of respecting the privacy and personal boundaries of the individual characters with the aims of reaching a wider audience with a compelling film.

Unlike a fictional film, the narrative structure of a documentary is not prewritten, but rather discovered during and after production—carved out on the editing table from the recorded footage. Although the filmmakers must sketch a preliminary plan, it only acts as a general guideline, and is constantly modified to accommodate the changing situation. In terms of structure, most documentary films do not have an ending in its classical narrative sense. There is no clear resolution, and, indeed, that is the power of documentary: to raise a question rather than giving an answer. The narrative of a documentary is more or less post-modern, related through various voices, which sometimes can be incompatible, unreliable or incomplete. It is left to the viewers to draw their own conclusions and interpretations of the story.

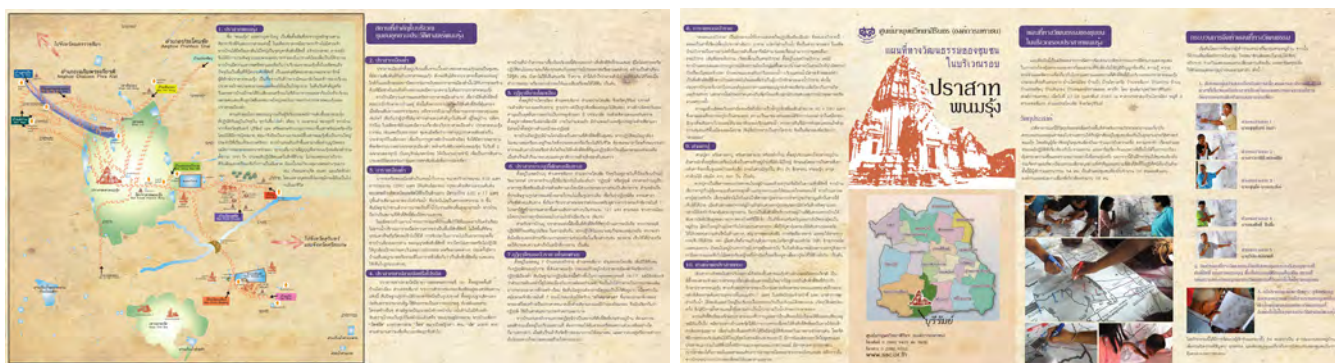
Finally, time is an essential necessity for a documentary project, since different pieces are found rather than recreated. The filmmaker needs to be at the right place at the right time to be able to witness what is deemed relevant to the story. Since these meaningful moments often occur unexpectedly, a great deal of time must be spent in the field with the characters in order to build rapport and glean the valuable moments as they occur. A lot of time is also needed for editing, since again the story needs to be found and shaped from what is recorded. An organic story is lying there in the film rushes to be found and thus brought to life.

often means including opposing perspectives. However, since some of the participants did not feel comfortable speaking openly, their voices were not fully represented, making it difficult to portray the situation. Indeed, one of the core challenges of this kind of collaborative

Exploring Cultural Heritage Rights at the Prasat Hin Phnom Rung Historical Park

by Alexandra Denes

Dr. Alexandra Denes is a Senior Research Associate at the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre and the Project Director of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums Field School, Visual Anthropology Program, and the Culture and Rights in Thailand Project at the SAC.



The Prasat Hin Phnom Rung sanctuary is an ancient Hindu temple located in Buriram Province. Constructed of sandstone and laterite between the 10th and 12th centuries C.E.

and dramatically situated atop an extinct volcano, the temple originally functioned as a symbol of the Hindu cosmos and as a ritual space for the legitimation of Angkorian era rulers, known as devaraja, or god-kings (Chandler 2000). With the collapse of Angkor in the 15th century C.E., the Phnom Rung sanctuary and similar Angkorian era, Hindu religious structures in the region lost their original symbolic and ritual functions, and yet they were not completely abandoned. Rather, subsequent settler populations of ethnic Khmer, Lao, Kui and Thai Khorat inscribed the sanctuaries with their own myths and incorporated them into their animist and Buddhist beliefs and practices.

“Many of our local informants told us that they felt that their values and cultural practices of pilgrimage had been marginalized and forgotten in this process of constructing Phnom Rung as a major tourist destination and site of national heritage.”

Between October 2010 and June of 2012, a team comprised of myself, Tiamsoon Siririsak (Mahidol University), Rungsima Kullapat (Vongchavalitkul University), and staff from the

SAC undertook field research with nine communities in the vicinity of the Prasat Hin Phnom Rung Historical Park in Buriram province, in order to better understand local residents’ relationships to the ancient sanctuary and other archaeological sites in the park, and to learn more about how the sanctuary’s incorporation into Thailand’s national heritage had impacted this relationship.

From our interviews with local residents of Nong Bua Lai village, Khok Muang village, Bua village, and Ta Pek village, among others, we found that Phnom Rung sanctuary and related ancient structures in the vicinity had long been regarded as sacred abodes of protective tutelary spirits (chao thi). Every year in April, on the waxing



moon, local villagers would travel by foot and by oxcart to make a pilgrimage to Phnom Rung, to pay respects to the tutelary spirits of place with incense and offerings, offer alms to the forest monks living in the vicinity, and worship at the Buddha's footprint (phraphutabat) which had been placed within one of the sanctuary towers. While there is no archival evidence indicating exactly when these local beliefs and pilgrimages began, the French surveyor, Etienne Aymonier, who visited the site in the late 1800s and observed the pilgrimage, suggested that they were practiced for at least one hundred years (Aymonier 1901). Our informants explained that their ritual relationship to Phnom Rung changed dramatically with the restoration of the sanctuary and opening of the Historical Park in 1988. In order to complete the restoration, the Buddhist monastery, Buddha's footprint and resident forest monks that were located near the sanctuary at the summit were moved down to a plot of land near the base of the ancient stairway. This separation of Buddhist and Hindu religious space was more than just an aesthetic choice of conservationists—it also represented the erasure of the syncretic, local, living meanings of the site in order to inscribe a scientific, archaeological narrative of the sanctuary as part of the nation's official heritage.

The impact of this process of incorporation into national heritage could also be seen in the transformation of the local, annual pilgrimage into a state-sponsored cultural spectacle for tourists, featuring reinvented ancient Hindu-Brahmin rituals and the staging of a sound and light performance. Many of our local informants told us that they felt that their values and cultural practices of pilgrimage had been marginalized and forgotten in this process of constructing Phnom Rung as a major tourist destination and site of national heritage.



Building on these findings from fieldwork, in February 2012, a team from the SAC organized a two-day stakeholder forum entitled “Community Participation in Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage,” with representatives from nine communities in the vicinity of the Historical Park. The aim of this forum was to invite local residents to share their beliefs, stories and memories about the archaeological sites within Phnom Rung Park, and to document these intangible values using a participatory cultural mapping process. Furthermore, in keeping with two decades of international legislation in the heritage sector recognizing the intangible values associated with heritage sites and the rights of communities to access and interpret their cultural heritage, a corollary objective was to generate recommendations for supporting community participation in the management, use and interpretation of the sanctuaries.

In the cultural mapping process, participants identified historical paths of pilgrimage to Phnom Rung sanctuary prior to the road construction, and marked the locations of spirit houses and other mythic and sacred sites within the local landscape. In contrast to standard maps of the Historical Park which focus predominantly on the archaeological sites from either a conservation management or tourism promotion perspective, the resulting cultural map of Phnom Rung offered a compelling visual affirmation of the longstanding spiritual significance of the sites to local populations of ethnic Khmer, Lao and Thai Khorat, thus rendering these living, intangible aspects visible and tangible.

In addition to the maps, the stakeholder forum also generated a substantial list of recommendations from participants about how to support the safeguarding of these intangible values. One of these recommendations

“Returning to the question at hand, can these local, intangible values inscribed in the sites exist alongside these dominant narratives, or do these “authorized heritage discourses” (Smith 2006) first have to be deconstructed in order to create the space for alternative interpretations of heritage?”

was to establish a local committee comprised of community leaders who would have a formally recognized role in decision-making about the management and interpretation of the sites within the park. One headwoman from Ta Pek village, Ms. Pan Thitkratok, suggested that such a local committee should have a role in planning the annual Phnom Rung festival held each April together with other key government offices and facilitating access to the sanctuaries for locally organized cultural events and rituals. Another recommendation was to integrate the cultural maps into the local school curriculum as a tool for teaching about the intangible values associated with the sanctuaries, thus fostering greater respect and understanding among younger generations.

All in all, the field research and mapping process in the vicinity of the Phnom Rung Historical Park revealed that the communities living near the archaeological sites had inscribed these edifices with their own spiritual and mythical meanings, incorporating them into a living corpus of animist and Buddhist beliefs and practices. Indeed, this practice of reinterpreting and reincorporating archaeological sites into animist and Theravada Buddhist belief systems has been widely observed by scholars of Southeast Asia such as Srisaksa Vallibhotama, who described this widespread practice as a kind of revival and transformation of “dead” religious architecture (Srisaksa 1995).

However, what this research also revealed is the challenge of creating a space for recognition of these intangible meanings and living values in a national context where the field of heritage conservation is still by-and-large focused on the preservation of the physical fabric of the sites according to rationalist, scientific, and archaeological principles, and where access and management of heritage sites is influenced by the tourist industry and by politicians. Returning to the question at hand, can these local, intangible values inscribed in the

sites exist alongside these dominant narratives, or do these “authorized heritage discourses” (Smith 2006) first have to be deconstructed in order to create the space for alternative interpretations of heritage? The larger challenge that lies ahead is how to raise critical awareness among the different stakeholder groups in Thailand about the inherently multivalent and contested nature of heritage, and the rights of communities to have a say in how their heritage is managed.

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More detailed data and analysis about this research project can be found in a chapter in the forthcoming edited volume, *Rights to Culture? Language, Heritage and Community in Thailand* (Silkworm Press, 2013), and in an article in the centenary volume of the *Journal of the Siam Society*, entitled *Protecting Siam’s Heritage* (2013). A short film about the stakeholder forum and cultural mapping process in Buriram Province is available at the Culture and Rights in Thailand website: <http://www.sac.or.th/databases/cultureandrights/>

The State and Ethnic Identity of the Phu Tai: A Case Study from Mukdahan

by Sirijit Sunanta

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When I started writing my proposal for the Culture and Rights project in 2009, I had read a range of literature on multiculturalism and cultural rights, mostly written by scholars placed in the Western world. Having been away from Thailand for my graduate studies for more than six years, upon my return, I was surprised to learn that leading institutions and scholars in Thailand were discussing cultural diversity, multiculturalism, and cultural rights, topics I did not hear much of ten years earlier. Highland groups who had formerly been known as chao khao (mountain peoples) and chon klum noi (ethnic minority) had now begun organizing as indigenous peoples. The sense of political correctness and cultural sensitivity had begun to develop to the extent that groups such as chao khao were now referred to as klum chatiphan (ethnic groups) rather than chon klumnoi, a pejorative term that signifies non-Thai groups who pose threat to the state. Thai state agencies, following international organizations and non-governmental organizations, had started to make use of the vocabulary of cultural diversity, local wisdom, and community-based development (Connors 2005), and the state had begun to allocate significant resources for revitalizing local and ethnic cultures, supporting local livelihoods, and regenerating local histories. I decided I wanted to take part in the discussions and try to understand the shift towards a more inclusive notion of Thai national identity and a new emphasis on pluralized and localized “Thai-ness.”

Ban Phu: A Phu Tai Village

Recommended by a colleague, I chose Ban Phu, a village in Nong Sung District, Mukdahan Province, to study local understandings and implications of cultural rights in the Thai context. Consisting of 250 households, the villagers of Ban Phu are mostly related to each other and are of the Phu Tai ethnic group, one of the major ethnic groups in northeast Thailand. Ban Phu is known as an outstanding model for community development projects and has won a number of titles in this regard. More recently, the village has also been chosen as a site for community culture projects. In 2009, the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Co-operatives nominated Ban Phu as a Model Sufficiency Economy Village Level 3; the village received a cash award from Mukdahan's Wattanatham Thai Sai Yai Chumchon Project the same year.

“I found that decades of state rural development policies and the prevalent localism discourse had significantly shaped the way the Phu Tai in Ban Phu relate to their ethnic identity and their understanding of citizenship today.”

The Phu Tai, who speak a Tai language that differs from the Thai-Lao language spoken by the majority of the population in the northeast and from Central Thai, the national language of Thailand, are recognized as a klum chatiphan, or an ethnic group, in Thailand. Entitled to full Thai citizenship rights, the Phu Tai in Northeast Thailand today are descendants of Phu Tai migrants forced to move from the west side of the Mekong River during the war between Siam and King Anu of Vientiane in the first half of the nineteenth century. They

were among tens of thousands of Lao, Phuan, Saek, Kaloeng, and Bru peoples who were relocated in Siam's attempt to empty towns and cities on the western side of the Mekong to permanently destroy the Lao Kingdom and cut off supply lines to Vietnam, Siam's main rival at the time. Groups of Phu Tai were settled in what are today Mukdahan, Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon, Kalasin, and Udon Thani provinces. Despite their active political role in the Free Thai Movement and the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) during and after World War II (Piyamas 2002), the Phu Tai were generally perceived as a "good" and non-threatening ethnic group in post-Cold War



Thailand. They have become known in the wider Thai society as the *Wiang Ping* of the Isan region for their exotic culture and beautiful women. Phu Tai silk textiles, *pha prae wa* (brocaded silk scarves), produced under Queen Sirikit's Arts and Crafts Project, are known as "the queen of silk textiles" and have become a highly prized commodity.

The Absence of Cultural Rights

Cultural rights, according to the literature, generally refer to special rights for ethnic, religious, and cultural minority groups within the state, which support the recognition of their cultural practices and the preservation of their cultural heritages and group identities. Historically, the modern Thai state has placed great emphasis on integrating peoples of diverse cultural heritages into the unified Thai citizenry. National language and education policies have largely played an assimilating role while the media and the construction of national historical narratives have contributed to the homogenization of Thai national identity.

I went to Ban Phu with this understanding of cultural rights in mind, and started exploring how Phu Tai villagers felt about being a member of an ethnic minority group in Thailand, and to see whether the Phu Tai were asserting any forms of cultural rights claims. I found it difficult to start a conversation about cultural rights in the Phu Tai in the village. First of all, the cultural rights concept is new in Thailand and it is difficult to explain to the villagers what it constitutes. Second, when I asked how they feel about the marginalization of ethnic identities by state policies, my Phu Tai respondents were perplexed by the question and found it irrelevant for their own case. "We are proud to be Thai, we are Phu Tai, not *chon klum noi* (minorities)" is the reply I often received. My study was then diverted to formulating an explanation for the absence of cultural rights consciousness among the Phu Tai in Ban Phu and to understanding the relationship the Phu Tai have with their ethnic identity. I found that decades of state rural development policies and the prevalent localism discourse had significantly shaped the way the Phu Tai in Ban Phu relate to their ethnic identity and their understanding of citizenship today.

A Development-oriented Village and the Legacy of the Cold War

During my fieldwork, I was struck by the developmentalism narrative that dominated the villagers' self-representation. Villagers often recounted stories from back in the 1960s and 1970s of how Ban Phu villagers fought to acquire electricity, a high school, and paved roads. I heard stories about the formation of village youth groups to promote village development and the concrete benefits that the villagers derived from their connections with high ranking military officials and the palace. The most recited story was that of Ban Phu villagers' audience with the King and Queen of Thailand at Chitlada Palace in 1974, facilitated by General Saiyud Kerdphol, the director of the Communist Suppression Operations Command. During the meeting with the monarch, Ban Phu villagers asked for a high school to be built in their village and it was granted. In 1975, the military celebrated the opening of the school with a parachute show.

During the Cold War in 1950s to 1970s, because of its location in the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT)'s area of influence, Ban Phu was subject to Thai

Cold War state policies. Led by the understanding that economic development was the solution to the nation's security problems, the Thai Cold War state concentrated on rural development programs, especially in security sensitive areas including Northeast Thailand.

“Ban Phu’s case demonstrates that the preservation and revitalization of local cultures often have developmental ends—tourism, self-sufficiency economy, and local industry and business—that do not directly promote the consciousness of cultural rights.”

Ban Phu villagers actively joined government-initiated development projects. They worked closely with the Community Development Office in forming occupational groups such as weaving groups and handicraft-making groups. In the context of state-guided developmentalism, Ban Phu villagers embraced state development policies as rural citizens and not as members of the Phu Tai ethnic group. Ban Phu’s invented lai kaew mukda woven silk, for example, was promoted as a local product of Mukdahan without special mention of the Phu Tai wisdom or identity. It was only when the villagers started their tourism and homestay project that they began to intentionally perform their Phu Tai identity for the consumption of visitors from outside the community.

The Ban Phu Homestay Project was launched in 2007 with the support of the Nong Sung District Community Development Office. Ban Phu’s visitors are mostly state officials and local administrative employees who come in groups for an educational tour to learn about Ban Phu’s development and Sufficiency Economy Projects. The villagers welcome their visitors in Phu Tai traditional clothes and serve a Phu Tai dinner accompanied by cultural performances such as music and dances. The village’s products—hand-sewn Phu Tai-style shirts, sarongs, sin, hand-woven cotton shoulder cloths, and other handicrafts—are displayed for sale during the guest visits. The Ban Phu Homestay Project has proven profitable: in 2007, Ban Phu’s total homestay income was 1,856,660 baht.

Culture as Rights or as Resources?

Ban Phu’s case demonstrates that the preservation and revitalization of local cultures often have developmental ends—tourism, self-sufficiency economy, and local

industry and business—that do not directly promote the consciousness of cultural rights. The promotion of the local culture industry, including tourism, contributes to the revival of Phu Tai weaving, dress, and performances, but not to all aspects of the Phu Tai cultural heritage. The local school chooses to teach Phu Tai cooking

and dance performances rather than Phu Tai language as part of the local curriculum. Ban Phu villagers have almost completely lost their ability to read the ancient Lao Buddhist palm leaf manuscripts that the previous generations left them. Traditional yao healing practices have already disappeared from Ban Phu.

Phu Tai Cultural Heritage and Future Prospects

A few possible actions can be taken to preserve and revitalize Phu Tai cultural heritage. Network and coalition-building among the Phu Tai from different villages and provinces in Thailand as well as from across national borders would be an important step to promote and revitalize Phu Tai ethnic identity. Regional scholars and cultural activists can play a leading role in building and supporting a cultural rights movement and encourage the organization of ethnic minority groups in Northeast Thailand. The state should take an initiative to form a national policy that promotes the teaching of ethnic languages in school and facilitate the revitalization of scripts. These moves would increase chances for minority cultures such as Phu Tai to survive into the future.

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The Community Forest Movement's Strategic Use of Culture in Rights Claiming Process: Reflections from field research

by Bencharat Saechua

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Regulations on *pu ta* forest management at Kok Somboon village, Sakon Nakorn.

The above letter from the Prime Minister Surayud Julanont to the Constitutional Court explaining the Community Forest Bill passed during his term reflects an interpretation of the community rights provision in the 2007 Constitution. After two decades of public debates on whether community settlement should be allowed in protected forest, the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) passed the Community Forest Act in late November 2007. Under Article 25 of the Act, the communities that had settled inside the protected forest before the demarcation of the protected area, and had managed the forest as a community forest for at least ten years before the Act came into effect, could ask for permission to manage the forest communally. The communities settled “outside” the demarcated protected forest, however, were excluded from such rights although they may have also been taking care of and using the forest. In addition, Article 35 prohibits the cutting and collecting of woodlots in the community forest inside the protected areas. This would prohibit the use of forest timber for consumption or for household needs, such as repairing houses.

“The community’s rights in the management, maintenance and exploitation of natural resources in a balanced and sustainable fashion as guaranteed by Section 66 of the (2007) Constitution are rights that evolved from long-term systematic practices associated with community livelihoods. The rights which emerged this way are not basic human rights. They are, therefore, not the rights that the Constitution aims to protect. They are merely the rights that the Constitution acknowledges, recognizes and wishes to promote to the communities to properly exercise. The law that puts certain conditions and regulations upon the community’s rights in the management, maintenance and exploitation of natural resources is therefore not in violation of human rights¹”

The letter from the Prime Minister in defense of the Community Forest Bill shows how “community rights” are often seen as contingent upon the responsibility of the communities to take care of the forest. Interestingly, the strategic rights claiming process and discourse associated with the community forest movement are also based on a similar argument of responsibility to protect the forest. The community forest movement asserts that local communities possess traditional knowledge of how to live in harmony with their forest environment, and therefore are legitimately entitled to live in and manage the forest. Such environmental discourse powerfully challenges the Thai state’s policies of centralized control of Thailand’s forests. However, the extent to which community rights claims are being accepted as fundamental rights of access to forest resources is still being negotiated through the interactions between the movement’s representatives, the state and the wider public.

¹The Prime Minister’s letter (Urgent) No. Nor Ror 0503/1184, dated 16 January 2008, cited in the Constitution Court Ruling No 15/2552, dated 4 November 2009.

In the research “Rights Claims and the Strategic Use of Culture to Protect Human Rights,” I explore such interaction. Looking at the rights discourse from a social constructionist standpoint, I do not search for a definite meaning of community rights. Instead, I attempt to understand how rights are perceived and claimed and how culture is used strategically as a resource in such process.

In search of rights: Rights claims based on legitimacy

During my field research in two northeastern villages that participated in the community forest movement, I set out to identify and better understand the traditional forest-related practices such as those that were often cited by the movement’s supporters as the basis of community rights and legitimacy to live in protected areas. However, I soon learned that this task was not as simple as I initially expected it to be.

One of the most prominent strategic framing processes used by leaders of the community forest movement in Thailand was the reference to communal traditional knowledge and cultural beliefs and practices which reflect a harmonious, respectful and sustainable relationship with the forest. In this strategic discourse, local cultural practices are reinterpreted within an environmentalist framework to support the villager’s claim for legitimacy. For example, the beliefs and practices surrounding the sacred shrines of the ancestral spirits (*pu ta*)² are often explained in environmental terms, as traditional beliefs that promote environmental conservation. Some “local traditional practices” are also formalized and labeled with environmental values. The significant case in point is the formalization of communal land/forest use by demarcating certain areas as “community forests” (*pa chumchon*). The *pa chumchon* is to be managed according to community forest management regulations and monitored by a community committee.

From my discussions with local residents, however, I learned that most villagers were not explicitly conscious of the environmental implications of the *pu ta*



A *pu ta* shrine

forest and *pa chumchon*, with perhaps the exception of a few community leaders. In the two villages I studied, the villagers rarely used the *pa chumchon*, and mainly collected forest products from the protected forest surrounding the villages. To my surprise, many were not aware of the existence of the *pa chumchon* in the village at all. Having witnessed the community forest movement’s strategic use of culture to assert claims of resource entitlement on behalf of the community, I became more critically aware of the need to examine the community rights discourse from a constructionist perspective.

Both of villages where I conducted field research differed markedly from the prevailing image of the “local traditional community” as represented in Section 46 and Section 66 of the 1997 and 2007 Constitutions respectively. Firstly, the villages were relatively new, having been established by economic migrants in search of agricultural land during the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, one of the villages was linguistically and ethnically diverse, and therefore that village did not have a shared body of traditions or homogeneous cultural practices to constitute a unified, collective identity. In both villages, the so-called “cultural practices” related to forest conservation were newly introduced, mainly to support the struggle to remain living in the protected forest.

² Literally, *pu ta* means grandfather.

The community forest movement often refers to local communities as forest people who are engaged in a subsistence economy. In the communities that I studied, however, villagers were generally more dependent on the market than on the forest. While forest products provided food supplies and extra income to the villagers of both communities, the villagers were mainly dependent on cash crops or on remittances from family members working in the city to meet their other basic needs. In stark contrast to the prevailing image presented by the community forest movement, their lifestyles were not those of the subsistence livelihood forest dwellers, and farmland, not forest products, was the crucial resource for the villagers' survival.

However, the community forest movement avoids the discussion of land rights for fear of their perceived association with forest encroachment. As a result, the constructed community rights discourse is mainly about the rights to natural resources management, not about the essential needs of the movement members: access to forestland for viable commercial agriculture. This is evident from various drafts of the Community Forest Bill proposed by the community forest movement in the past two decades. While the debates on the Bill are mainly about whether communities should be allowed to manage protected forest, every draft of the Community Forest Bill prohibits land occupation, settlement, and farming within the community forest. Literally speaking, therefore, even if the communities' rights to manage community forests were legally recognized, their residences and their farmland within the protected forest would still be at risk of eviction. The community forest activists hope, nevertheless, that if the communities were allowed a role in forestry conservation, it would automatically follow that they would be allowed to stay in the forest.

Rights in Contention

On 29 September 2008, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) requested the Constitutional Court to rule on the constitutionality of Article 6, the National Park Act 1961 (B.E. 2504), which allows the government to decide to “reserve any land with interesting natural conditions in order to maintain its condition for the educational and leisure purposes of the people” and demarcate that area

as protected forest. The demarcation of a protected area entails the exclusion of human settlement from the area, including in the cases where local communities had settled there before the area became protected forest. The NHRC argued that such a provision violated Section 66 and 67 of the 2007 Constitution, which guarantees community rights to natural resources management. The Constitutional Court ruled that the Article 6 of the National Park Act did not affect human rights and is not unconstitutional. The Court backed the spirit of the Act to “protect the existing natural resources ... not to be destroyed or altered. The main objectives are to protect and maintain public interest and the interest of the people in general³”.

The Constitutional Court's decision reiterates the fact that a community's rights to natural resources management or, in fact, the rights to access natural resources as a means of livelihood, are often placed in an inferior position to the national and public interests in public policy making. It also raises critical questions about the community forest movement's strategy of continuing to promote the idiom of “traditional culture” in compliance with the national interest to protect the forest.

The community rights discourse of the community forest movement has been evolving and changing over the past two decades, and has made its way into Constitutional provisions and into the wider public discourse. Nevertheless, the meaning and scope of community rights is still being negotiated, and the rights need to be better respected and protected. Approximately 1.2 million people with de facto rights to live in protected forest are still at risk of being evicted as long as their rights to land and basic livelihoods are deemed as incompatible with the larger “public good” of forest conservation. Rather than focusing on representing communities as the living embodiments of “traditional culture,” the question the movement needs to ask is as follows: how can a community's right to livelihood and natural resources be effectively balanced with the state's goals for forest conservation?

³ P. 4 *The Royal Gazette*, Vol. 129, Section 40 (Kor), dated 10 May 2012.

The Mukurtu Workshop at the SAC

by Alexandra Dalferro

Alexandra Dalferro is an English language content developer at the SAC. She received her BA in East Asian Studies and Anthropology from Columbia University, and she was a Fulbright Junior Researcher from 2009–2010, working on an ethnography of the legal lottery system in Thailand and the roles of itinerant ticket sellers from Loei province.



Before 2008, the above photograph could only be accessed through the Manuscripts, Archives and Special Collections unit in Washington State University's Holland and Terrell Library. Interested parties could read the title, "Three Yakama Women," and the description, "A photo of 3 Yakama women in regalia (1911)." No further context was provided, and many critical questions were left unanswered, such as: Who are the three women in the photo? Is their "regalia" also their everyday clothing, or have they dressed this way for a certain ceremony or festival? Does the image contain any sacred or culturally sensitive aspects that should not be seen by the general public? Most importantly, who has the right to describe and propagate the photograph?

Today, the photograph “Three Yakama Women” is a part of the Plateau Peoples’ Web Portal, an interactive, online digital archive developed by Washington State University in 2008 to provide access to Plateau peoples’ cultural materials through collaboration with tribal communities. Members of five tribal nations have the ability to add and curate materials from their own tribes, thereby claiming space for the voices of source communities and challenging the widespread valorization of institutional narratives of objects and histories. “Three Yakama Women” is now presented in rich detail, enhanced with accounts of tribal knowledge from Yakama people who are members of the web portal.

The Plateau Peoples’ Web Portal would not exist without the free, open-source community archive platform Mukurtu, which enables indigenous communities to access and circulate digital cultural heritage materials in ways that reflect their own cultural priorities. Recognizing the potential applicability of Mukurtu to its digital database projects, the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Center organized a Mukurtu workshop from the 17th to the 18th of December 2012, and SAC staff had the opportunity to learn from and exchange with Dr. Kimberly Christen, Mukurtu Project Director, and Dr. Michael Ashley, Mukurtu Development Director. The workshop was part of the SAC’s ongoing Culture and Rights Forum, with interest in Mukurtu arising as researchers continue to consider the roles that source communities play in database development and dissemination.

Digital technologies have become so embedded in daily life that many individuals accustomed to this seamless integration fail to question the hierarchy of access that determines who can produce and engage with devices, programs, and content. The Mukurtu program evolved from an effort to address and destabilize these categories that shape our understanding of and interaction with digital platforms such as the internet. In 1995, when members of a Warumungu community in Tennant Creek,

Australia started building their own arts and culture center, they achieved the return of many local artifacts that had been housed at national museums across Australia. In addition to these physical returns, the community also received over 700 digitized photographs that were taken by an early missionary to Tennant Creek. Most community members had never seen the images, but upon assessing the collection, they decided that many photos and the knowledge surrounding them should not be made universally accessible. Some images contained sacred or sensitive content that necessitated restricted viewership,

with only certain kin, gender, or age groups being permitted to see the images and modify or contribute related content.

How could this digitized collection of images be featured at

the arts and culture center without sacrificing the “offline” cultural protocols that influence diffusion of knowledge and reaffirm positionality and social order within the community? Working alongside Warumungu community members, Dr. Kim Christen began incorporating these already-existing community roles and relationships into the digital platform that would become Mukurtu. Each photograph was classified with different levels of cultural protocols to determine appropriate audience, such as, “restricted community: male AND bird clan.” Every community member has their own username and password, and their access level corresponds with their user profile, which is determined collectively and set by a system administrator. If a database user’s profile says that she is a female member of the snake clan, then this person will be able to see and contribute to all “open” content, as well as to all content that is restricted to females OR snake clan members, and finally, to all content that is restricted to females AND members of the snake clan. In the Warumungu language, Mukurtu means “dilly bag,” or a bag used to hold sacred items. The dilly bag is accessible to members who act responsibly within the community and gain the trust and permission of knowledgeable community leaders. Like the dilly bag,

“The workshop was part of the SAC’s ongoing Culture and Rights Forum, with interest in Mukurtu arising as researchers continue to consider the roles that source communities play in database development and dissemination.”

a Mukurtu-powered archive is a “safe keeping place,” a community repository for cultural materials and knowledge that grows from sustained use, dialogue and negotiations (Mukurtu 2012).

Over the course of the two-day workshop at the SAC, Dr. Christen and Dr. Ashley introduced Mukurtu’s main features and instructed SAC staff on how to technically implement the platform. Although staff are still deciding if Mukurtu will be

incorporated into any existing SAC databases, the Mukurtu workshop was a catalyst for needed discussion and exchange. SAC researchers gave presentations on their respective projects, specifically highlighting

project target groups and processes of community participation in management and utilization of data. The presentations provided valuable opportunities for staff to reflect upon the trajectories of their projects in the context of the SAC’s strategic objectives and the source-community-driven ethos of Mukurtu. In considering the SAC’s digital databases, Dr. Paritta Chalernpow Koanantakool, the former director of the SAC, called for increased “database dialogue,” or the fostering of connections and collaborations across databases and projects. Before such dialogue can occur, however, target groups must be firmly delineated, which involves confronting the perceived dichotomy between academics and source communities as target user groups. The Local Museums in Thailand team is currently grappling with this issue as they develop access options for the Local Museums Database to enable museum staff and local community members to contribute and modify content. Similarly, the Anthropological Archives Database researchers are creating a system of cultural protocols that will protect culturally sensitive content and allow source community members to add their own narratives to the materials gathered by anthropologists.

The availability of Mukurtu represents a crucial step towards integrating the rights and voices of source communities into all aspects of heritage management.

One concern that was raised by SAC staff, however, is the suitability of digital platforms like Mukurtu in a local Thai context. In communities where computer use is still very much determined by age and income, embodying the inequalities of the “digital divide,” staff fear that the introduction of Mukurtu could unintentionally result in the creation of an exclusive community-within-a-community of contributors, or individuals who already have computer skills and can attest to the relevance of digital

technologies to their daily lives.

This inadvertent preferencing of voices would be difficult to avoid in communities with few computers or computer-savvy members. Moreover, SAC staff worry that in such communities, the desire to utilize a program like Mukurtu

would not emerge from within the community itself, but would instead be encouraged and imposed by researchers, therefore undermining the researchers’ and Mukurtu’s core goal of community ownership and empowerment.

The Mukurtu Workshop helped to draw out and illuminate the challenges that face project staff in developing dynamic, inclusive, and sustainable digital databases. As cultural heritage resources are increasingly digitized and made accessible via the internet, practitioners everywhere must consider how these rich accounts of tangible and intangible culture can be shared in ways that respect the rights and priorities of source communities and position community members as primary decision-makers.

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Introducing the Culture and Rights Forum at the SAC

by Alexandra Dalferro

In the month of October at the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, researchers and project staff have traveled across Thailand, delved deep into archives, and designed and updated databases. Dr. Trongjai Hutangkura, leader of the SAC's Publicity and Networking Division, has been teaching himself to read and write the ancient Thai alphabet of the Sukothai period so that he can better understand the manuscripts he researches. The Barefoot Anthropology team spent a week in Mae Hong Son lending support to Karen villagers as they developed cultural safeguarding activities. Dr. Narupon Duangwiset hosted a seminar on sexuality called "Handsome Gay Kings: When Gay Men Long for Masculinity." These are only a few examples of the diverse events and processes that occur at the SAC on a monthly basis, and they illustrate the organization's vast scope of interest and engagement. What, then, do these projects have in common? How can they be related to one another in ways that illuminate shared themes and challenge and enrich objectives and methods? The recently launched Culture and Rights Forum attempts to address these questions while introducing core concepts of cultural rights to SAC staff. The forum will also emphasize how research, documentation, archiving, and communicating on cultural issues need to take into consideration the rights of source communities.

The Culture and Rights project commenced in 2009 as a multi-sited, field-based research initiative for Thai and international scholars. As the research progressed, Project Director Dr. Alexandra Denes and Project Advisor Dr. Coeli Barry realized that the ideas and discourse surrounding culture and rights resonated implicitly with the work of the SAC, and they wished to draw out and interrogate these embedded concepts along with SAC staff. They envisioned a structure that would allow sustained commitment to the discussion of culture and rights at the SAC, thereby creating a space for continual reflection and institutional identity building. After much careful planning, the Culture and Rights Forum was born. For the next ten months, through June 2013, SAC staff will meet at least once a month for half-day sessions to



discuss issues ranging from sexuality rights to community involvement in and access to digital heritage. Forum Facilitator Jan Boontinand, a PhD candidate at the Institute for Human Rights and Peace Studies of Mahidol University with many years of experience working with Thai NGOs, will guide each session, helping to stimulate dialogue that links material from presenters back to the work of the SAC. Dr. Barry affirms that the forum can also be referred to as a "laboratory," as she wishes to highlight the unique, experimental nature of this program. It is Dr. Barry's hope that the opportunities the forum will provide for reflexivity, communication, and connection will strengthen the SAC's thematic framework and enable staff to solidify around a more collective identity.

The first Culture and Rights meeting was held on September 26th. Participants began by sharing aspects of their work that make them feel passionate as well as their expectations for the forum. Dr. Barry then gave a general overview of the concept of cultural rights and presented her thoughts on Michael Brown's introduction to his book, *Who Owns Native Culture?* Brown explores the operationalization of cultural rights theories by indigenous groups who have used this rhetoric to call for repatriation of sacred objects and control over cultural meanings and replication. Fearing that the procedures and strategies surrounding these claims, not to mention the cultural forms in question, will become increasingly standardized and codified via intellectual property laws, Brown decries practices of litigation and legislation that turn culture into property and instead advocates approaches that establish the inherently relational, context-dependent nature of the ownership problem. In his reaction to the forum so far, Chewasit Boonyakiet, a research assistant at the SAC, echoes Brown's concern, "In Thailand, we don't really use the vocabulary of rights yet – we refer to it as heritage that

belongs to certain groups. When claims are made, there is not a process in place for responding to them. We need to come up with a multifaceted method – one that does not only emphasize community rights, or mainstream museological principles, for example – but is nuanced and case-specific.”

SAC staff wrestled with the ideas of Brown as they divided into small groups to brainstorm examples of cultural rights-claiming behaviors in Thailand. Discussions of the Assembly of the

Poor protest of 1997, Yong language and identity revitalization in Lamphun, and the Ministry of Culture-designated Karen Special Cultural Zone

led to exchange about ownership and the management of the SAC’s digital resources, as substantial amounts of research are made available to the public through online databases. How can resources be designed and circulated in ways that involve source community members as decision-makers and key users of materials? What if the database in question contains ancient Buddhist inscriptions that initially seem far-removed from original creators and users? Dr. Hutangkura, who has played a large role in developing the Inscriptions in Thailand Database, elaborates, “Now I am thinking about the true owners of the inscriptions. Are the owners the museums and researchers, or are the owners the temples where the inscriptions were created, along with the the surrounding communities that still attach meaning to these documents? And in what context do the manuscripts belong? How can they be distributed so that they are not abused and copied without permission? Many times the manuscripts have been copied without official permission from the temples, and we still don’t have clear laws and regulations about these matters.” Dr. Hutangkura touches on issues that are at the crux of the culture and rights debate, issues that will continue to be deconstructed at subsequent Culture and Rights gatherings.

At the second meeting on October 16, Dr. Barry and Ms. Boontinand structured the session around two readings that came from presentations made by Elsa Stamatopoulou and Richard Wilson at the 2004 Carnegie Council. Stamatopoulou attempts to answer the question, “Why cultural rights now?” by outlining international protection

mechanisms and pointing to the rise in racism, xenophobia, and intolerance across the world, in addition to the emergence of new technologies that facilitate communication from previously-unheard-from source communities. While Stamatopoulou is a firm believer in the potential of international human rights instruments to imbue cultural rights with political saliency and mend age-old injustices, Richard Wilson argues that the conception of culture upon which these instruments

are founded is essentialist and flawed. He posits that culture is only useful as a concept for thinking about society when it is viewed as a transformative, fluid, and open system, which stands in direct contrast with the bounded, categorized

configurations of culture recognized by Stamatopoulou’s legal frameworks. According to Wilson, the state has no place in cultural matters. How can these antithetical perspectives be productively reconciled? And how do they apply to the ways that the SAC defines culture and assesses the utility of cultural rights?

Perhaps we can begin to answer these questions by approaching them with knowledge of vernacularization. This concept, advanced by anthropologist Sally Merry, is used to describe the process of appropriation and local adoption of globally generated ideas and strategies. Before staff at the SAC can integrate culture and rights ideas into projects or share relevant insight with community members, we first must be able to make culture and rights meaningful and comprehensible within our own institution. This multi-layered vernacularization cannot be accomplished without an in-depth understanding of all projects and initiatives encompassed by the SAC, and the forum seeks to provide space and support for such exchange and enhancement. Feedback from the first two meetings is encouraging, and Dr. Barry asserts, “I feel hopeful. It seems like a lot of people are willing to participate actively and make the connections between their work, these ideas, and what the Centre does. It feels very positive and I think we have achieved a consensus on the value of the forum.” The Culture and Rights Forum places the SAC in an exciting position to contribute to the dialogue on the possibilities and parameters of vernacularizing rights that surround heritage & identity, while continuing to develop and evolve as an institution.

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The Third Local Museums Festival 2012: “Cultural Savvy: Local Knowledge Fighting Crisis”

■ by Alexandra Dalferro

From the 23rd to the 27th of November 2012, the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Center (SAC) organized the Third Local Museums Festival around the theme, “Cultural Savvy: Local Knowledge Fighting Crisis.” When we think about crises that have faced Thailand in recent years, the first events that come to mind are most likely the 1997 financial crisis, the 2004 tsunami, the 2006 military coup, or the widespread flooding of 2011. These incidents received extensive international and domestic media coverage, yet the reports generally focused on circumstances in and narratives from central Thailand, and relied on analysis from a variety of experts and public figures to explain events.



If we depend solely on news outlets and published materials to learn about crises that influence Thailand, we risk overlooking the insight and experiences of everyday people across the nation who have used local knowledge to cope with disasters in their communities. Although these challenges that elicit ingenious responses from individuals and communities might not be featured by the mainstream media, they become woven into collective community history and identity. As spaces for the display and safeguarding of these histories and identities, as well as the objects they encompass, Thailand’s local museums offer us a glimpse of how populations from all over the country have reacted to both local and national periods of difficulty. In order to illuminate the stories, approaches, and wisdom that have arisen in times of crisis, the SAC invited sixty-nine local museums from all four regions of the country to share their perspectives on “Local Knowledge Fighting Crisis.”



Costumes and props of mor lam performers who engage in the “kaw khao” tradition were displayed as part of the Mahasarakham University Museum exhibition.

The festival was structured thematically around five core ideas. The first core idea focused on “local knowledge versus nature.” Cycles of nature can teach humans how to live prudently in accordance with local

environments, climates, and available resources. However, when nature threatens normal ways of life in the form of natural disasters, such as floods, droughts, and tsunamis, people must devise effective survival methods. In the case of communities represented by the Mahasarakham University Museum from Mahasarakham province, the period before the annual rice harvest was often a time of flooding and hardship. In order to feed their families, groups of mor lam performers would travel from village to village, engaging in the “kaw khao” tradition, or “asking for rice.” Upon arriving in a new village, they staged a lively evening show at the local temple. The following morning the group would walk through the village, asking community members for uncooked rice as a token of appreciation for the performance.



The Khlong Lat Mayom Floating Market Museum brought an example of an easy-to-make boat to the festival.

Other museums displayed innovations that involved reacting to nature by altering the surrounding environment or by building vessels such as boats. Surachai Runboonrat, who founded the Khlong Lat Mayom Floating Market Museum in Bangkok, adapted a traditional boat pattern and now teaches interested individuals how to make their own simple wooden boats that can be constructed quickly in times of emergency. He hopes that his

“As spaces for the display and safeguarding of these histories and identities, as well as the objects they encompass, Thailand’s local museums offer us a glimpse of how populations from all over the country have reacted to both local and national periods of difficulty.”

course will counter the greed of those who charge inflated boat-use fees by encouraging people to be more prepared for flooding, to share resources, and to work together as communities.

Community cohesion was also a critical element of the second core idea, “local knowledge versus sickness and

disease.” To view illness not only as a physical problem is to realize that one’s well-being is closely related to one’s families and communities. As such, the struggle against illness does not involve the body alone, but requires emotional treatment and a focus on personal relationships. Furthermore, the methods of care must be founded upon local religious and natural beliefs that correspond with the social context of each locality. Representatives from the Phu Tai Renu Cultural Center in Nakhon Phanom illustrated the inextricability of family and community from local healing rituals when they demonstrated the “Yao” ritual. Many members of the Phu Tai ethnic group believe



The exhibition displaying information about the “Yao” healing ritual

that when an individual falls ill, an angry ghost has entered the body, and recovery will not be possible until the spirit has been ushered out with soothing entreaties and prayers. Thus, the Yao ritual is performed by local healers and family members, who sit with the sick person

and sing special songs, beseeching the ghost to leave. At the festival, this theme of the spiritual, intangible dimension of illness was not divorced from biomedical approaches: visitors to the exhibit set up by the Nang

Ratchaworawiharn Temple Museum in Bangkok had the chance to learn about the temple's use of ancient manuscripts called dtam rai yaa, which describe common diseases and provide lists of herbs that can be mixed to treat the ailment in question. The dtam rai yaa, however, do not specify the order in which the herbs should be combined or the quantities that should be used; friends or relatives of the sick individual had to consult the monks themselves for directions and guidance. In this way, the monks could ensure that the medicines were prepared correctly, and knowledge of the herbal remedies was passed to others through demonstration and practice.

The essential role of nature in coping with various challenges was evident across all five core ideas, including



Examples of dtam rai yaa from the Nang Ratchaworawiharn Temple Museum in Bangkok

the third core idea, “local knowledge versus war and politics.” The period of the Greater East Asia War (1942–1945) was a difficult, uncertain time for communities across Thailand: daily life was characterized by anxiety and lack of necessities. Clothing in particular was very expensive and hard to obtain, and many people found themselves wearing rags or even no clothing at all. Local people in Chacheongsao province, whose stories have been collected by the Saay Yai Community Thai Cultural Center, looked to the environment around them and realized that banana tree fibers could be dried and cut into thin threads. They used this banana fiber thread in place of cotton or silk thread to weave clothes that protected their bodies

and served as effective camouflage during potential air raids.

By mid-1943, Allied aircraft frequently bombed targets in Thailand, seeking out concentrations of Japanese troops. The city of Chiang Mai became a focal point of the

attacks, but bombs also fell in surrounding provinces. When locals in Phrae province discovered an undetonated bomb in a field, they removed the gunpowder and used it to catch fish by setting off small explosives in the water. The shell of the bomb was brought back to a villager's home and filled with water for washing feet. A monk, intrigued after seeing the unusual water vessel, asked if he could strike it to test its sound: he found the timbre to be pleasant to his ears. The bomb shell was thus converted into a temple bell and today is housed at Sri Don Kham Temple in Phrae. This bomb-turned-basin-turned-bell, aside from illustrating the inventiveness and resourcefulness of villagers in Phrae, also expresses the many layers of meaning embedded in objects and the vital role that local museums play in gathering and transmitting these rich, multivalenced histories.

The fourth core idea of the festival was “local knowledge versus economy.” This core idea emphasized the premise that the neoliberal economic system deprives everyday people of bargaining abilities, and these individuals struggle to make a living. Local people whose lives have been affected by development and the highly competitive capitalist market have shared stories that reflect a renewed focus on cultivating a sense of community and the importance of cultural capital. In Songkhla province in 1984, an abbot from Don Temple



The temple bell from Sri Don Kham Temple

reconfigured a trenchant symbol of capitalist power, the bank, in order to reduce local dependency on moneylenders and to curb the dangers associated with these relationships. The “Bank of Life” now has over 900 members who each deposit thirty baht a month at Don Temple. The funds are available to non-members in times of emergency, and members can borrow money anytime as long as they pay the amount back, with interest, within six months. The collected interest is kept in a separate fund that is used for community development activities.

The fifth core idea, “local knowledge versus cultural

change,” featured the largest number of exhibitions, which perhaps indicates current initiatives and priorities of local museums across Thailand. As local traditions and cultures are commercialized and commodified for tourism purposes, aspects of local identities, such as languages, performing arts, crafts, and other



Thai local snack products created as part of the “Bank of Life” project

cultural expressions, are irrevocably altered to fit these tourism imaginaries. Additional forces of change include an increasing pressure to achieve a cultural fluency that is rooted in notions of Bangkok-based modernity, which is itself deeply shaped by global flows and trends. Nonetheless, cultural safeguarding and transmission projects have been launched by local communities and museums who have realized that these shifts contribute to the distortion and destruction of community history, identity, and shared heritage. Chern Panpai, a member of the Chong ethnic minority group from the Center for the Study of Chong Language and Culture in Chanthaburi province, has been at the center of a local Chong language revitalization movement. The seriously endangered Chong language is over 1000 years old, and speakers have never used a writing system. With support from Mahidol



Left: Chern Panpai demonstrates how to write Chong alphabet
Right: Chong alphabet displaying at the festival

University, Panpai, along with linguists and community members, instituted a Chong language curriculum in local schools, using Thai orthography to teach writing and pronunciation. Panpai, however, firmly believes that the Chong language should have an alphabet of its own, and so he created one. Whether or not the alphabet will be widely implemented remains to be seen, but this case illustrates the complicated relationship between language, identity, and the production of power relations among social groups.

The SAC’s Third Local Museums Festival, “Cultural Savvy: Local Knowledge Fighting Crisis,” gave visitors and museum representatives alike the opportunity to contemplate Thailand’s rich cultural diversity and the resiliency of local communities. Times of crisis are undeniably times of fear, loss, and insecurity, yet these very feelings help to crystallize the knowledge and values that individuals and communities are willing to fight to preserve. As societies across the world continue to confront a multitude of grave issues, from climate change to human rights violations to repressive political regimes, the Local Museums Festival serves as a reminder that crises are truly averted when all voices are heard and all communities are given space to participate in decision-making processes.

Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums Field School 2013:

Mapping Intangible Culture in Surin Province

August 5–17, 2013

2013 Field School Practicum

In the field of heritage management, participatory cultural mapping has been widely recognized as an important tool for heritage practitioners and culture bearers to identify, research, document, and revitalize intangible heritage. As a process, participatory cultural mapping brings together members of a community to reflect upon how their histories, memories, cultural practices, handicrafts and traditional knowledge are embedded in the landscape, thus encouraging a holistic understanding of how intangible heritage is part of the wider social and environmental context. While participatory cultural mapping is often employed as a first step in identifying intangible heritage, cultural maps which represent the intangible can also be used for the purpose of awareness-raising, education and revitalization of traditional knowledge with different stakeholder groups, including youth, visitors and government authorities. Furthermore, in some cases, communities undertake what the anthropologist Nancy Peluso (1995) has called “counter-mapping” as a strategy for defending their traditional rights to use natural resources and territory against state or private actors.

This year, the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre’s 2013 Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums Field School will focus on participatory cultural mapping as a tool for identifying and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Through lectures and a field-based practicum with communities in Surin Province, participants will be introduced to the concepts and process of participatory mapping. The possibilities and limits of participatory mapping will be discussed and debated in relation to the two core themes of the Field School—Safeguarding Intangible Culture and the role of museums. In particular, the Field School will explore how cultural mapping can facilitate new museological approaches to safeguarding intangible culture, such as the establishment of ecomuseums.

Participants will work in close collaboration with participating communities in Surin Province to design and produce a cultural map of intangible cultural heritage as part of their practicum. Technical support for the production of the map will be provided by the SAC.

For further details about the 2013 Field School in Surin, please visit our website:

<http://www.sac.or.th/databases/ichlearningresources/>

Visualizing Culture: Ethnographic Film in Thailand and ASEAN

From 10–12 April 2013, the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Center will host a two-day event, “Visualizing Culture: Ethnographic Film in Thailand and ASEAN”. Open to researchers, filmmakers, anthropologists, students and the interested public, the event will feature the screening of three ethnographic films produced by alumni of the 2012 SAC Visual Anthropology Workshop, as well as a short presentation by Professor Peter Crawford from the University Tromsø, Norway and Mr. Gary Kildea from the Australian National University about the Visual Anthropology Workshop 2012, followed by discussion after the screening of each film. The three Thai films to be shown at the screenings are as follows:

- 1 Behind the Curtain: The Daily Life of Women in Thailand’s Southern Border Provinces” by Ms. Rahanee Daoh
- 2 “The Third Eye” by Dr. Unaloam Charungmaneekul
- 3 “Voices of the Spirit Cave” by Mr. Suporn Shoosongdej

In addition, ethnographic films from ASEAN countries will be included in the program, followed by a round table discussion about ethnographic film in the ASEAN region, as well as an exploration of the future of ethnographic film and opportunities for network-building and collaboration between visual anthropology institutions in the ASEAN region. From this event, the SAC hopes to encourage mutual understandings of different cultures both in Thailand and ASEAN region, promote the knowledge on ethnographic films and strengthen the Southeast Asian network in ethnographic filmmaking.

For further information, please contact Ms. Pimonwan Bunnag, Tel. 0-2880-9429 ext.3610

VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Visualizing Culture: Ethnographic Film in Thailand and ASEAN
Screening and Roundtable
Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (Public Organization)
April 10-11, 2013

April 10, 2013

"Revisiting the 2012 Visual Anthropology Workshop: How can ethnographic film help us to understand cultures?"

Professor Peter Crawford and Mr. Gary Kildea, Visual Anthropology Program, University Tromsø, Norway

"Behind the Curtain: The Daily Life of Women in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces" a film by Ms. Rahanee Daoh

"The Third Eye" a film by Dr. Unaloam Charungmaneekul

"Voices of the Spirit Cave" a film by Mr. Suporn Shoosongdej

April 11, 2013

"Ethnographic Film in Vietnam and the Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies (VICAS)," Dr. Bui Quang Thang and Ms. Nguyen Thi Thu Ha, VICAS

"The Yangon Film School," Ms. Frances Calvert, Konrad Wolf School of Film and Television, Babelsberg, Germany

"Ethnographic Film and Visual Culture Studies in Thailand," Dr. Amporn Jirattikorn, Chiang Mai University

and Prof. Suddan Wisudthiluck, Thammasat University

Group Discussion and Roundtable: How can Ethnographic Film foster mutual understanding and respect in ASEAN?

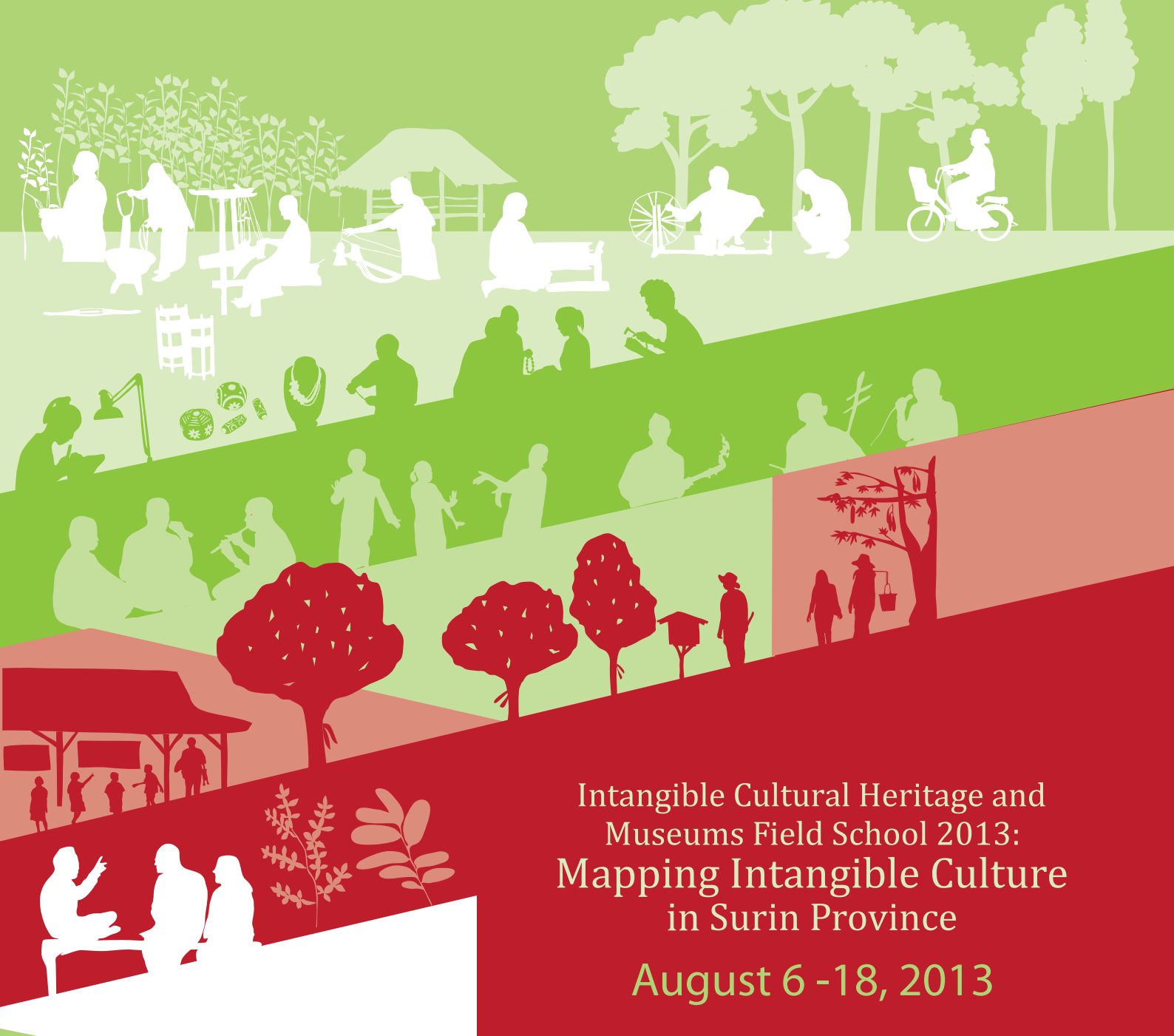
Please note that attendance for this event is limited.

Kindly RSVP by April 5, 2013

For further information, please contact Ms. Pimonwan Bunnag, pimonwan.b@sac.or.th, Tel. 0-2880-9429 ext.3610



www.sac.or.th



Intangible Cultural Heritage and
Museums Field School 2013:
Mapping Intangible Culture
in Surin Province

August 6 -18, 2013

For further information

[http://www.sac.or.th/databases/
ichlearningresources](http://www.sac.or.th/databases/ichlearningresources)

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Co-hosted by the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn
Anthropology Centre
and the International Research Centre
for Intangible Cultural Heritage in
the Asia-Pacific Region (IRCI)